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Sask. reopen plan promises 'increased testing' for COVID-19 but offers no details

'Broad-base' testing on horizon: premier

Adam Hunter · CBC News · Posted: Apr 25, 2020 9:33 AM CT | Last Updated: April 25, 2020

The Saskatchewan government says it has capacity to conduct 1,500 tests per day. The last time there were more than 1,000 tests in a day was when 1,051 tests were announced April 8. (Darryl Dyck/The Canadian Press file photo)

comments

The Saskatchewan government's reopen plan promises increased testing for COVID-19, but it does not describe how or when that will happen.

Premier Scott Moe has said testing and "aggressive contact tracing" will be part of the government's arsenal as it combats COVID-19, while opening up businesses over the next several weeks.

But the plan for who will be tested, and how the province will expand beyond who is currently being tested, is not clear.

"Even though our testing numbers were less than 1,000 per day for a few days, the test positive rate being low [1.28 per cent] suggests that we are not missing cases," said Dr. Saqib Shahab, the province's chief medical health officer, on Friday, when 10 additional cases of COVID-19 were announced.

"When we have a cluster or outbreak, certainly local public health will be working in the local community to expand testing as required in those settings," he added.

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Shahab said the rate of positive tests further decreased between April 17 and 23, to less than one per cent.

The government had increased the testing capacity at the Roy Romanow Provincial Laboratory to conduct as many as 1,500 tests per day, but it hasn't hit the 1,000 test mark since April 8.

In the government's 39-page reopen plan unveiled on Thursday, there are two sentences which describe testing.

"Key elements will include increased testing and contact tracing, as well as the preparation of additional space and critical equipment," it says.

Dr. Saqib Shahab, chief medical health officer for the Saskatchewan Health Authority, said the low rate of positive tests suggest that testing is still effective, despite testing less than the goal of 1,500 samples per day. (Michael Bell/The Canadian Press)

The document also says that as restrictions are lifted a variety of indicators will be monitored, including ensuring that "the provincial health system has enough capacity to test, isolate and treat every case, as well as trace every contact."

Premier Scott Moe said part of the province's success in preventing COVID-19 spread is its testing and contact tracing.

"What we have done is increased our testing capacity greatly and increased our contact tracing capacity with literally hundreds of people available to work on that contract tracing so that if we do have that localized outbreak we're able to address it," Moe said.

He said Saskatchewan has the lowest standard when it comes to showing symptoms and being tested, since people only need to show one symptom before a test is conducted.

"Mass testing" is something the province wants to work toward, the premier added.

"There are going to be asymptomatic people that do carry this this virus and we know that that's happened in other areas."

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But he said the province will likely need to wait until it can offer antibody testing to show who may have immunity to the virus before it can expand the testing scope widely. Those types of tests are not yet available.

"It really is very difficult to do any degree of mass testing with any degree of certainty, as you may test negative today and then be positive in two or three days as the incubation period of the virus continues," Moe said.

Testing should have been 'front and centre': NDP

Opposition NDP Leader Ryan Meili said he wants to know why testing isn't expanding. He suggested testing residents in long-term care centres, homeless shelters and health care workers.

Meili said La Loche residents could also be tested even if they aren't showing symptoms, due to the localized outbreak there.

He said expanded testing specifics should have been "front and centre" in the province's plan, and argued the issue was "short-changed" by the government in the document.

"We are not now where we need to be for testing. By May 4 will we be, I certainly hope so, but it's going to take a lot of effort to get to that point," Meili said.

Passive testing should change: expert

Dr. Anne Huang, a former deputy medical health officer in Saskatchewan, says the province should move away from its "passive testing" practices, which rely on self-assessments and referrals from 811 or a family doctor.

"Rather than waiting for people to present with symptoms, I think that it's important, especially in these smaller communities in the north, that the public health officials take an active case-finding approach — meaning, if possible screening everyone."

There is no barrier for testing in the far north and anyone who currently has symptoms can get tested, according to Dr. Rim Zayed, medical health officer for the region.

"When we started to get more cases — and it was anticipated — most of the positive cases we got were already at home in isolation," she said. "At the same time, we set up a plan for mass testing in the community."

Zayed said the plan could be be complete as early as Saturday. A GeneXpert testing unit is in La Loche, which will allow for more tests and a quicker turnaround time.

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